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ABSTRACT

When English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) students were few and far between at college, they were absorbed into regular Freshman English courses designed for, and dominated by native speakers. However, it appears that ESL students are best served by placing them in classes specially designed for their needs, rather than mainstreaming them or placing them in basic writing classes. Despite more than a decade of research on ESL writing which points to the disadvantages of mainstreaming, it still appears to be the most common placement option. ESL and basic writers share certain characteristics; however, ESL writers often are fluent writers in their first languages and academically superior students. ESL students and basic writers also differ in their learning strategies. ESL students placed in basic writing courses might infer that they are being penalized for being culturally and/or linguistically different. Special classes for ESL students are offered at many larger campuses, but there are a number of reasons for not having such classes: (1) lack of sufficient ESL students to justify special classes; (2) special classes may be seen as remedial; (3) special classes could be seen as a form of segregation; and (4) problems in creating a new program. With the help of ESL specialists, English departments should be able to begin special classes for ESL students. Research of the effect of special ESL classes indicates that teachers and students were enthusiastic about the classes. Special classes in Freshman English will provide a sheltered environment for ESL students, allowing them to develop a sense of community with their peers. (Contains 16 references.) (RS)

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ESL Students in Freshman English: An Evaluation of the Placement Options

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Abstract

ESL Students in Freshman English: An Evaluation of the Placement Options

This paper evaluates the three placement options for ESL students in Freshman English. The options are mainstreaming, placement in basic writing classes, and placement in special ESL classes. The third option is recommended, provided that a sufficient number of ESL students are enrolled to justify special classes.

ESL Students in Freshman English: An Evaluation of the Placement Options

The influx of international students to American colleges and universities is growing at the rate of 5 percent a year. When the large number of recent immigrants who attend these institutions is added to this number, students who speak English as a second language (ESL) form a significant percentage of the undergraduate population. These students, like their native-speaker counterparts, are required to take Freshman English courses. As evidenced by Gibian (1951) and Ives (1953), writing program administrators and English faculty have long been concerned about ESL students in Freshman English classes. In recent years, with the presence of these students in almost every Freshman English class, the issue has drawn increasing attention.

The three options for placing ESL students in Freshman English are mainstreaming, placement in basic writing classes, and placement in classes especially designed and designated for ESL students. In this paper, my aim is to argue that ESL students are best served in the third option--in special ESL classes. I will develop my argument by evaluating the three placement options.

An explanation of two terms is needed here. First, I apply the broad term "ESL students" to both international and immigrant students, acknowledging that for many, English could be a third or fourth language. Second, I use the term "basic writers" to include those who use standard English as a second dialect (SESD). These are the students often placed in developmental or remedial classes.

Mainstreaming

When ESL students were few and far between, and research on ESL writing was sparse, they were absorbed into regular Freshman English courses designed for and dominated by native-speakers. Despite more than a decade of research on ESL writing which points to the disadvantages of this option, it still appears to be the most common. Although statistics at the national level are not

available, an informal survey of colleges and universities in Alabama showed that, of the forty-six campuses where ESL students are enrolled, thirty-six mainstream the students.

Granted, ESL writers share some characteristics of native-speaker writers. Cumming (1989) has shown that ESL students who are expert writers in their first language are able to apply successful writing-strategies (such as planning and revising) which are similar to those of expert native-speaker writers when they write in English. Further, the strategies used by inexperienced ESL writers are similar to those of inexperienced native-speaker writers; they do not plan their writing clearly and have difficulty in retaining chunks of meaning in their mind as they write (Cumming, 1989; Bereiter and Scardamalia, 1987).

Despite these similarities, researchers have noted the significant differences that separate second language writers from native-speaker writers. Silva (1993) has summarized this research, which shows that second language writers planned less, found goal setting, and generating and organizing material to be more difficult, and transcribing "more laborious, less fluent, and less productive" (3). Second language writers also reviewed, reread, and reflected on their writing less. Their writing contained fewer words but more errors, and received lower scores in holistic ratings. In using background readings and answering essay examinations, second language writers were less effective. Their reader analysis was "less appropriate and acceptable" (3) and their writing was stylistically distinct and structurally simple. The writing showed more conjunctions and fewer lexical ties, and also displayed less control, variety, and sophistication in the use of vocabulary. While the typical native-speaker college student has a reading and listening vocabulary of 150,000 words (Murray, 1989), second language writers' vocabulary is much smaller.

Although the above differences may not cause major problems in mainstream classes, one area which is problematic is topic development. ESL writers have little knowledge of topics that most native-speaker writers are familiar with. The 60s, AIDS, drugs, gun control, and divorce, popular topics in most regular

Freshman English classes, often pose enormous and sometimes insurmountable obstacles to ESL writers. McKay (1989), who has identified a written discourse accent in ESL writers, emphasizes the need to assign topics which relate to ESL students' background knowledge.

While surface level errors of ESL writers such as in syntax and diction are easily observed and corrected, teachers are often unable to pinpoint more subtle rhetorical differences caused by the different language backgrounds of ESL students. In other languages, textual cohesion and organization may be effected in ways that are different from those used in academic English (Reid, 1989). If teachers of streamline classes, with no training in ESL, fail to recognize and acknowledge these rhetorical differences, ESL student essays could be judged as inferior (Land and Whitley, 1989).

In addition to pedagogical inadequacy, mainstream classes could present an ideological mismatch. Santos (1992) has shown how the teaching of composition to native-speakers is viewed in ideological terms, while the aim of ESL composition is more pragmatic. While "changing political goals and/or changing students' political consciousness" (9) appears to be the aim of current neo-Marxist composition theory, the aim of ESL composition is to help ESL students assimilate as quickly as possible. These contradictory aims could cause some confusion in setting teaching objectives.

How do teachers react to the presence of ESL writers in mainstream classes? Joseph (1992) conducted detailed interviews with ten teachers of composition, many of whom have taught Freshman English for over 15 years at a medium-size university which enrolls about 900 ESL students. The teachers were asked a series of wide ranging open-ended questions. When asked what problems they encountered in teaching ESL students in mainstream classes, the teachers responded that ESL students were reluctant to talk in class, didn't let the teachers know if they understood instructions, had different proficiency levels from native-speaker students and needed more explanations, which the native-speaker students found tedious. When asked if the majority of ESL

students had the same writing problems as native-speakers, all the teachers responded in the negative; the main problems they saw were in the use of idioms, prepositions, tenses, and subject-verb agreement. Some teachers said that they had difficulty in understanding the (English) dialects spoken by the ESL students, which caused miscommunication to occur quite often. The teachers said that ESL students expected the teachers to do most of the talking during conferences, and that some students found the one-to-one interaction with the teacher difficult to handle. According to some teachers, the difficulties during conferences only magnified the problems in the classroom. As for rhetorical differences, most of the teachers had no idea of how ESL students would organize a paper in their languages. One teacher commented that she "never dreamed they would organize a paper differently" (5).

If ESL students differ so much from native-speakers, and their presence in mainstream classes is problematic, why is mainstreaming so common is Freshman English courses? The reason may be convenience; administrators do not have to create new courses or hire qualified ESL specialists at a time of budget restraints. However, the consequences of mainstreaming could be disastrous for ESL students, resulting in "resentment, alienation, loss of self-confidence, poor grades, and ultimately, academic failure" (Silva, 1993, p.5).

Placement in Basic Writing Classes

Some WPA administrators acknowledge that ESL writers need special attention by placing them in basic writing classes. Despite the long standing objections of ESL specialists (see Nattinger, 1978; Leki, 1992), Santos (1992) notes that the merging of ESL and basic writers is on the increase. In Alabama, of the forty-six campuses where ESL students are enrolled, seven place them in basic writing classes.

ESL and basic writers share certain characteristics such as problems with punctuation and a lack of coherent rhetorical structure, standard sentence construction, and control over some grammatical structures. Roy (1984), perhaps the best known

proponent of placing ESL students in basic writing classes, argues that with regard to goals, learning strategies, and stages of language acquisition, ESL and basic writers are similar. There is no question that ESL and basic writers have a similar goal, the mastery of standard written English. However, in regard to learning strategies, Roy admits the lack of published evidence that ESL students and basic writers acquire forms of standard English in a similar way. Instead, what has been observed is a similarity in many of the errors made by the two groups in the acquisition of standard English. In fact, Roy only cites errors with the terminal -s (of the third person singular present tense) in support of her assertion. Further, Roy's contention that meaningful interaction with users of standard English is a necessity for the acquisition of standard forms by both ESL students and basic writers argues against, not for, their placement together. Neither will acquire from the other the standard forms.

Although both groups need special attention in composition classes, Leki (1992) has summarized the numerous differences between ESL and basic writers. For instance, error analysis has shown that when learning a second language, the most difficult features to master are those that are closest to the learners' first language. As a result, basic writers may have more difficulty in mastering standard English than ESL writers. Second, ESL writers, who may have learned even conversational skills from textbooks, tend to use a formal register in their writing, while basic writers often resort to an informal register.

Discussing personal histories with writing, Leki notes that basic writers have usually experienced years of failure as writers, resulting in low self-esteem and low self-expectations. Since the ability to write effectively affects overall academic performance, many basic writers are low academic achievers as well. ESL writers, on the other hand, often consider themselves to be fluent writers in their first languages, on their way to becoming fluent writers in English. Since most ESL writers are academically superior students, earning the respect of their teachers, they possess a high self-esteem. The confidence gained

could be severely affected as a result of being placed with basic writers.

Leki also discusses how ESL and basic writers differ in their learning strategies. Basic writers are better able to substitute spoken forms and thereby increase the chances of their writing being understood. They are also able to read aloud and edit written errors. In the case of ESL writers, there is little difference between their spoken and written forms, and often they barely understand what they read aloud, attempting to grasp textual meaning not from context but from individual words. In essence, basic writers use top-down processing strategies while ESL writers use bottom-up strategies, focusing on words to comprehend sentences and passages. In addition, basic writers share numerous cultural and linguistic assumptions with their teachers, which help them communicate better in the classroom, a facility which ESL writers lack.

The numerous differences between ESL and basic writers described above lead to pedagogical problems when the two groups are taught together. For instance, ESL-basic writing classes are often taught by teachers trained to deal with the problems of basic writers, who may be at a loss when faced with the problems specific to ESL writers. Another problem is the choice of textbooks. Textbooks meant for basic writers may not address the problems of ESL writers and vice versa. Benson, Deming, Denzer, and Valeri-Gold (1992), who compared the writing of ESL and basic writers, state that the many differences between the two groups are better handled separately.

Perhaps the main problem of ESL-basic writing classes is psychological. ESL students, who have a high self-esteem as skilled and experienced writers in their first languages, might "infer that they are being penalized for being culturally and/or linguistically different, and that to be different is to be deficient" (Silva, 1993, p.6) when placed in classes with basic writers. On the other hand, basic writers, who are frequently "reminded of their distance from the economic and/or social mainstream" may regard such classes "as another instance of their own marginalization" (Leki, 1992, p.28).

Special ESL Classes

Given all the evidence that mainstreaming and placement in basic writing classes is detrimental to ESL writers, why aren't they placed in classes especially designed and designated for them? In fact, such classes are offered at many larger campuses, which usually enroll a significant number of ESL students and/or where English department faculty include an ESL specialist. Sometimes, these classes are the result of pressure brought on the university administration by personnel in charge of ESL students (such as International Student Advisors) or by the students themselves. However, a number of reasons are cited for more Freshman English programs not having special classes for ESL students.

One reason is the lack of sufficient ESL students to justify special classes. The U.S. has more than three-thousand colleges and universities, and an inhospitable climate, a rural location, limited course offerings, or a high tuition rate can discourage ESL students from enrolling in some institutions. A second reason is that special classes may be seen as remedial and subordinate to mainstream classes, and therefore resented and shunned by ESL students. Third, special classes could be seen as a form of segregation, preventing ESL students from interacting with and learning from native speaker students as in mainstream classes. Finally, the main reason could be that a new program has to be created, with the attendant problems of curriculum design, staffing, and supervision. These problems may be exacerbated by university administrators who discourage the added expense of such classes at a time of budgetary restraints.

Of the reasons cited above, only the first (insufficient enrollment of ESL students) appears to justify the lack of special classes for ESL students. In Alabama, for instance, more than half the campuses have less than fifty ESL students. The second reason, the impression that special classes are remedial and subordinate to mainstream classes, can be erased when ESL students and the campus community realize that the curriculum in these classes is as challenging as that in mainstream classes. Most faculty from other disciplines are sensitive to the needs and

problems of ESL students, and generally welcome the idea of these needs and problems being addressed by English departments. The third reason, segregation, is not significant since ESL students mix with native-speakers in all classes other than Freshman English. In fact, at many institutions, ESL students are given the option of enrolling either in mainstream or special classes; the students will make an informed decision based on feedback from their peers and academic advisors.

The fourth, and probably the most daunting reason for not having special classes for ESL students is the logistics of preparing a new curriculum, hiring or training teachers, and supervising them. These logistics may seem insurmountable, but with the help of ESL specialists from within or outside the campus, English departments should be able to begin special classes for ESL students. However, a few issues must be addressed first.

As increasing numbers of ESL students enroll in mainstream classes, Freshman English program administrators will begin to hear from the instructors of these classes, complaining of their inability to cope with ESL students. Requests may also be received for special classes from those in charge of ESL students on campus and from the students themselves. This is the time to address the first issue: do the numbers justify special classes? A census of the ESL students in Freshman English classes should be taken; if around one-hundred enroll annually, special classes are justified.

The second issue is staffing. If possible, an ESL specialist with a M.A. in Teaching English as a Second Langauge (TESL), with some course work in Rhetoric and Composition, could be hired. This does not have to be a new position; the ESL specialist could be the replacment for a retiring faculty member. If an ESL specialist cannot be hired for the English department, such a specialt can be consulted at the pre-academic intensive English program on campus or at a neaby campus.

The third issue is the selection and in-service training of English faculty, usually from those who teach Freshman English, to handle the special classes. Often, faculty who are sympathetic to

the needs of ESL students and those who support change in the curriculum volunteer to be trained to teach these classes. The in-service training sessions should not last more than three days, and can be repeated annually. Curriculum prepration and textbook selection are best done during the training. After adequate publicity is provided on campus, a few special classes could be offered on a trial basis where initial obstacles could be removed and problems solved. Freshman English program administrators can seek frequent feedback from the teachers and students of these special classes. Regular meetings of the teachers are also important.

Braine (1992) has described how special ESL classes were introduced to the Freshman English program at a medium-size university. The description outlines the selection and training of English faculty to teach these classes. A three-day training session conducted by an ESL specialist, consisting of readings, discussions, and presentations by international student advisors, intensive English program faculty, and ESL students, is also described.

How do teachers who have taught mainstream classes react to special classes of ESL students? Braine (1993) reports that most teachers found ESL students, who usually remain passive and silent in mainstream classes, became actively involved in classroom activities and discussions, and often asked questions from the teacher. Some teachers stated that they looked forward to meeting their international students each day, and that the students had rekindled their interest in teaching composition. (Most of these teachers had taught 6 sections of Freshman English each academic year for 15 years or more.) One teacher said that she learned as much from the ESL students as they did from her and wished she could return for a Ph.D. in ESL pedagogy.

The response from ESL students has been equally enthusiastic. In a recent survey of 180 students who were or had earlier been enrolled in the special ESL classes at the same institution, 92 percent agreed that the classes should be continued. When asked to explain their reasons, many students said they were free of anxiety in these classes, mainly because they did not have to be

embarrassed when speaking with an accent. Others stated that the teachers were caring and understanding of their problems, and paid more attention to them (Braine, 1993).

For many ESL students, the required courses in Freshman English is a formidable obstacle to their academic objectives. This is best seen in the large number of ESL students who excel in their majors, yet choose to postpone Freshman English to the junior or senior year. Special classes in Freshman English will provide a sheltered environment to ESL students, allowing them to develop a sense of community with their peers. Such classes would also signal the English departments' commitment to a group of students who add richness and vitality to the American academic experience.

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